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TECHNIQUE IN ELEMENTARY MANUAL TRAINING.

HARVEY G. HATCH,

SUPERVISOR OF MANUAL TRAINING, ROCKFORD, ILL.

WITHOUT doubt there is no one stronger influence at work today upon educational methods than is brought together under the general and indefinite name "manual training." It is not strange that a visitor at the St. Louis educational exhibits should have a doubt, as far as visible evidence is concerned, as to the accomplishment of other school work than manual training.

Even admitting the truth of this visible evidence, the real educational significance can be shown only imperfectly in an exhibition, and as we individually feel the large part which "doing" plays in the progress of life, we see the real need for so large a representation in the school curriculum.

While it is no concern of the present moment to lay stress on the shortcomings of early attempts, we can truthfully express sincere thanks for even a Russian beginning. It is devoutly to be wished, however, that a term more expressive of present objectives than is commonly implied in "manual training" might steal into common usage.

It was not strange that we first gave tools to children who could use tools with a fair degree of success, for we have so large an appreciation of our "practical" methods of living, not alone without, but within school walls. So we must not wonder that, to start with, high schools received the benefits of construction work, if, indeed, such a term could be applied to the first work done.

The growth of manual training has taken place in a rather unnatural way, in thus taking root in the upper strata of school work, and finally coming to the blossoming stage at the very foundations of all school work.

Courses have been made over and handed down to lower grades, not unlike the manner in which small boys sometimes fall heir to the clothing of their larger brothers. Course after

course, even as suit after suit, is made to do for successive generations in the school world. In discussions among school workers we do not hear, or at least the writer does not hear, the problem attacked from the point of view of the elementary school itself. Perhaps it is not strange, since throughout all school work so unproportionate an amount of means and interest are centered in the superstructure. Without doubt there is an awakening in progress, which shall draw unto the first-graders more of their own.

Construction work under the name of manual training is already strongly intrenched in the elementary grades, but, so far as having a philosophic foundation is concerned, it has come to be more by a process of imitation of activities suited to higher grades than by a real need and true application of work suited to its own life. It must be clearly evident to one sympathetic with child-life that a set course of exercises does not reach the needs of a restless child whose chief concern is to gain some idea as to the meaning of the complex life about him. To be sure, there is a physical organism at work, but there is hardly enough center to it to be satisfied with, or even to get much good from, any form of activity which has for its purpose the accomplishment of results other than can come within the child's own experience and appreciation. We cannot tempt these small muscles into accurate work, or the semblance of accurate work, wholly without the worker's choice. Somewhere between that kind of school activity called "busy work" and a more rigid or set form of occupation lies the true manual training for elementary grades; and for practical application in the common run of schools, where dependence for execution has to be made upon the regular teacher of the grade, it seems that work of such a character is most readily adopted.

With the conditions of ordinary elementary grades, it seems almost needless to have in mind such a word as "technique," and it is to be doubted if we should, had the beginnings of manual training been freer from a severely practical or commercial bias.

Having in mind the boy of six or seven who is just beginning to emerge from his infant bondage, it is especially hard to see in

him any natural adaptability to occupations which would involve technical and mechanical processes, or that could even be implied as technical. So my argument is not so strong against as is it alert in running away "where no man pursueth."

Human sympathy founded in a desire for a healthful, robust physical machine would naturally help us to avoid such forms as would tend to the use of small muscles or the development of ideas not directly serviceable in the life of children.

If the term is forced upon us and we *must* be technical, then let us search thoroughly the conditions of child-life and make the endeavor to have our efforts count for the most in building up strong, powerful tendencies that shall come in good stead as life progresses.

Opportunities come to the teacher in elementary grades to give work which will call out the greatest amount of individuality regardless of process or the tools involved. There will always be the opportunity to call tools and materials by proper names, and even this little would accrue to no mean advantage by the time higher grades are reached.

Emphasis could well be laid on this one idea, but it should not be construed as an objection to take the place of work involving ideas of wholes or correct mental images, which are results quite sufficient at this time, and will turn out to be the best kind of seed planted for more technical results later on.

In order to give children of these lowest grades an opportunity to practice the right kind of technique, I should want a room for their own use, and equipment would grow as demands were made by the workers themselves. I have the fear that my room would hardly be recognizable as a shop, but it would be a place of all kinds of materials and a place in which all kinds of spontaneous ideas would have a chance to take such definite form as children would give. Evidently there would be but little need of dictation in a shop of this kind.

Two very strong personal experiences make me believe in giving to children of elementary grades more opportunity for individual expression than is their privilege in rooms where rows of seats and desks are the traditional forms of furniture. First, I

can bring back from boyhood days the memory of the great delight of happy times spent in ransacking the remote, dark corners of an old garret. To be found there were odd pieces of furniture, boxes, old clothing, and in fact all manner of traps and findings that go to fill one of these resourceful places. How keen was the delight in making old chairs do service as four-in-hands, and again these same chairs could stretch out into long trains of cars with no important feature missing. Old boxes and boards would at one time serve as a store, while at another they would become transformed into buildings and railroad stations.

Another object-lesson came to me in the neighborhood of a social settlement. The city had provided a playground; old buildings were removed, and in their stead came a smoothly covered cinder lot with a flag-pole and a few seats. Close by this so-called playground was one which the neighborhood inadvertently provided. Not a flag-pole was here, nor seats, but everything that a civilized people discards and casts upon a city dump. There were children here always; after school and during school one could see little groups of "workers" building such castles as fancy and old bricks can fashion. In fact, constructive play ran rampant, and everything immediately essential to vivid imagination was here. The mere absence of a few technical details made no difference in the construction of these "imitation" houses. What a golden opportunity to impress a social faithfulness to the "technique" of right living!

It is undoubtedly the place of the school to take a hand in giving to children opportunity to work off emotional enthusiasm, and it becomes more necessary for them to have this opportunity to give motor expression to this busy work which surrounds them, as cities become more crowded, and the act of living becomes confined to smaller spots; and, as I write this, it is impossible to refrain from the thoughts of those forlorn and ghostly places generally provided for play purposes in the basements of ordinary schools. What possibilities of usefulness even in the adaptation of the underground regions to the real play-needs of children!

In a general way I have tried to show the need of giving children in the elementary grades opportunity to give expression

of ideas in any kind of material readily accessible. By confining material and the person too closely we confine expression when the demand is for broad expression. As a matter of manual training, let us make special endeavor to widen the scope of activity, both indoors and more, if possible, outdoors, for elementary grades. I have been utterly unable to see any application of the idea of technique in these grades, as understood in the higher grades; that it is in the field of the manual-training worker to recognize as technical the formation of those elements of character that help us to become better workmen because of the ability better to control ourselves in the midst of other workers. Each period of child-development yields its own peculiar contribution to the complete art of living, and in the elementary grades it seems opportune to emphasize the technique of social responsibility. It is noticeable in schools where manual training of ordinary type is first introduced in the seventh and eighth grades that the children do not at first understand their suddenly acquired freedom. Consequently, if some idea of this social responsibility or social freedom can be gained in the elementary play-shop, we ought to have a child better able to handle himself and express himself in the technique of tool manipulation in the higher grades.